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THE BELOW THE ZONE PROMOTION SYSTEM

BY

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system's impact. The BZ system affects few people directly, but indirectly affects the entire Officer Corps. For this reason, the BZ system should only be changed when it is obvious from thorough study that a change is required.

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THE BELOW THE ZONE PROMOTION SYSTEM

An Individual Essay

by

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Robert R. Hicks Jr., LTC, FA
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The Below The Zone (BZ) Promotion System is currently being studied by the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel with a view toward requiring future promotion boards to select the maximum percentage of BZ officers at each field grade promotion point. This essay investigates the history of BZ promotions and the impact of varying BZ promotion policy. The essay examines information which is known about the system and cautions against its use as a management tool when apparently little information is available regarding the system's impact. The BZ system affects few people directly, but indirectly affects the entire Officer Corps. For this reason, the BZ system should only be changed when it is obvious from thorough study that a change is required.

The Below The Zone Promotion System

The senior leadership of the Army is considering a change to the current below the zone (secondary zone) aspects of the promotion system for Officer Personnel Management Directorate (OPMD) managed officers. The purpose of this paper is to present the reasons which might cause a change to this system in the near future, to explore the type of change required and to make recommendations regarding any change to the system. The discussion that follows will include the purpose of the below the zone (BZ) promotion, any changes that may have affected the purpose and the effect these changes have had on the officer corps. Historical statistics will be presented to show trends which have occurred as the system has changed in the past. The restrictions and requirements of the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA) will be described in order to establish the boundaries for any change which may be contemplated.

The promotion system in which the Army operates today was founded on a system first implemented by the Officer Personnel Act of 1947. This act, following World War II, was based on the assumption, by Congress, that the armed services would revert to their pre-war, small,

regular organizations.¹ Some of our current policies can be traced back to that law, for example; "up or out" promotions and advancement by year groups.² In 1954, Congress grew concerned about temporary promotions and the number of field grade officers on active duty.³ The Officer Grade Limitation Act was passed that year, establishing specific limits on the numbers of regular and reserve officers who could serve on active duty as field grade officers. The Defense Officer Personnel Management Act, which was implemented in 1980, continues to apply the concept of field grade ceilings but eliminated the concept of temporary and permanent promotions in the field grade ranks. Instead, DOPMA opted for a single promotion system in which all officers on attaining the rank of Major (at approximately 10 years of service) are integrated into the Regular Army.⁴ Another provision of DOPMA which affects the promotion system is the provision which requires uniform promotion procedures but allows flexibility in the application of secondary zone promotions. DOPMA states that promotion opportunity and promotion points in the field grades will be approximately: 80% to MAJ with promotion at 10 (plus or minus 1) years of service, 70% to LTC with promotion at 16 (plus or minus 1) years of service and 50% to COL

with promotion at 22 (plus or minus 1) years of service.⁵ It should be noted that these phase points and percentages are goals, not requirements. With respect to BZ promotions, which were first used in 1950,⁶ DOPMA specifies that they apply to field grade promotions, that the services may promote as much as 10% of each list from the secondary zone and that each service can request an increase to 15% of each list from the Secretary of Defense. The act does not specify the size of the secondary zone but states that an officer can be considered in the secondary zone no more than twice.

The purposes of secondary zone or below the zone promotions are: to advance the most outstanding officers to higher grades and positions of increased responsibility at a pace intended to optimize the development of their potential, to provide recognition of outstanding potential, to provide incentive for outstanding performance and to assist in the retention of high quality junior officers.⁷ Because of the limitations on field grade strength levels, a secondary zone officer replaces a primary zone officer on a one for one basis. Therefore, BZ promotions can and have been used as a tool in helping to make the officer corps more youthful. Today, the Army is experiencing less

field grade retirements and resignations than predicted. For this reason, according to DCSPER statistics, promotions points are moving out along the time in service line and officers are slightly older at promotion than in recent years.⁸ As a result of increased retention and an effort to meet the promotion timing and opportunity goals, some field grade promotion lists have lasted up to 24 months. Because of this promotion slowdown, the Army is considering requiring promotion boards to select the maximum allowable number of below the zone officers. According to members of the DCSPER staff, the intent is to prevent the loss of the high quality officer who may perceive the slowdown as detrimental to his career progression and therefore leave the service. A related issue which influences the analysis of this system is the fact that the age of officers being selected to Brigadier General is also increasing. This, of course, is totally dependent on the promotion policy which advances officers to the rank of Colonel. It is important to remember that in 1981, the zone to Brigadier General was moved out one year in order to increase the number of first year eligible officers in a given year group. This zone movement should have made the average Brigadier General select approximately one year older.

The basic question which arises in any discussion of the promotion system is the question of youth and vigor versus age and experience. The Army seems to fluctuate between these two policies and has probably affected many careers in the process. Evidence of this fluctuation is shown in the secondary zone selection rates in the table on page 13. Although this shows only what has happened in the secondary zone system, it is indicative of a philosophical change which can permeate all selection and assignment systems. It is possible for specific year groups to be too young, when they should be old and experienced and too old, when they should be young and vigorous. For example, a year group that passes through BZ opportunity at a time when selection rates are low (age and experience are important) can then have good officers replaced by BZ selects at some future promotion point because policy has changed and youth is now more important. Although BZ opportunity alone will not affect a large number of officers in a year group, the cumulative effect of this fluctuation in several policies, i.e. military schooling, civilian schooling, command selection, etc. can have a significant effect. In 1980, the Chief of Staff, Army directed that, as one of his Army Cohesion and Stability Initiatives, a study of the secondary zone

system be accomplished with a view toward eliminating secondary zone promotions. In the final analysis, the system was changed slightly, to what we have today, as the value of maintaining some opportunity for early promotion outweighed eliminating it. At the time, secondary zone promotions were believed to be too high and complaints from the field stated that officers were arriving in jobs with too little knowledge and experience.⁹ Although only minor changes were made to the system, selection boards since 1980 have selected fewer officers for secondary zone promotions, thus, giving the system a self-correcting character.

Although an inherent part of the promotion system is that promotions are based on potential for future service in a higher grade, the measure of that potential is based on past performance. Selection boards must consider many variables in determining who to promote and who to advance more rapidly through below the zone promotions. Some of these variables are: demonstrated performance, educational level, job assignments or assignment pattern and a concept of qualification. In selecting an individual for accelerated promotion, it is not enough that he/she has demonstrated the potential for higher level assignments, but he/she must also be qualified in his/her branch or functional area or have

the ability to become qualified prior to promotion. The selected individual must have also attained appropriate levels of military and civilian education and be better qualified than the primary zone officer to be replaced. Because of the requirements on an officer's time to become "qualified", it seems that an upper limit on accelerated promotions could be established by determining the number of officers who can reach "qualification" early. It is possible that given the current guidance for promotion, the Army is selecting the maximum number of officers qualified for early selection. On the other hand, because of the numerous branches, functional areas and combinations of each which officers may hold in today's Army, it could be argued that it is not truly possible to determine the number of officers "qualified" for early advancement. The point of this argument is simply to draw attention to the huge demands placed on an officer's time. Given those demands, it is doubtful if more than a few can cross the many hurdles required to prepare them for early promotion. The below the zone promotion should be reserved for those few officers who are capable of attaining the requisite qualifications. The B2 officer should be held in high esteem not only by those who selected him, but just as importantly, by his

contemporaries. According to the "Bolte Report" of 1960, the key test of a promotion system is its acceptance by those involved and a general confidence in the selection process.¹⁰ In 1974, Secretary of the Army Calloway required promotion boards to select 15% of all promotion lists from below the zone.¹¹ The morale of the officer corps was jeopardized during this period as officers believed that too many officers were receiving a promotion designed for an elite few.¹² The president of the major's board that year reported out that there was not enough qualified officers in the secondary zone to promote 15% of the list. Upon being told that his board must pick the maximum, he resigned as board president. A new president was selected and 15% of the list came from the secondary zone.¹³ It is not surprising that the captains eligible for promotion that year questioned BZ policy.

In 1980, the last time a change was made to BZ policy, briefing notes were presented to the Chief of Staff, Army recommending changing to the system we have today. At that time, boards in the previous two years had not selected to their maximum authority, much like the present. The briefing notes provide some interesting facts and figures: 80% of the Brigadier Generals and Major Generals on active duty as of 1 August 1980 had

received at least one BZ promotion, and the same year, officers with previous BZ promotions filled 36% of the LTC command slots and 67% of the COL command slots. These figures can lead to the conclusion that BZ promotees "run the Army". Care must be taken, however, in interpreting these one year statistics. For example, the fact that in 1964, 95% of the Army's Lieutenant Generals were West Point alumni doesn't alter the fact that nine years later, 1973, only 50% were alumni.¹⁴ Unfortunately, statistics of a similar nature regarding today's Army are not readily available. BZ percentages of command slots can be determined but are biased by the policy which limits first time eligible command selects to 10% of the command list. With so few statistics available, it is possible that we are unaware of the effects of previous BZ policies. This thought appears to be further established by the fact that we are considering causing more BZ promotions while we have limited command selection boards to only 10% of first time eligibles (the population in which BZ officers are found) at both the LTC and COL level. This seems to send mixed signals to the officer corps as one policy tends to speed progression through the ranks and the other slows it.

Since Viet Nam and the 1970 Army War College study of

professionalism, the Army officer corps has worked diligently to establish itself as a proud profession grounded in a strong ethical and moral base. Statistics from the Professional Development of Officers Study (PDOS) survey in 1985 indicate that the Army is approaching the desired objective: 85% of officers surveyed are satisfied with their current duty position, but more importantly, 81% expressed intentions to make the Army a career; 26% of company grade officer survey respondents are undecided about the Army as a career (10% do not plan to stay); and the field grade percentage of those who will leave and those who are undecided is less than 1%. With respect to B2 promotions, 82% of the General Officers believe that the system should remain unchanged and the remainder of the officer corps is split with 25% favoring more B2 promotions and 25% favoring elimination of B2 promotions.¹⁵ These statistics indicate a positive attitude about our Army and seem to argue against change to the B2 system. In looking to the future, most newly commissioned officers will have heard of B2 promotions but will form their expectations based on the teaching, mentoring and coaching they receive throughout their careers. A system that is fairly stable and generally accepted can meet their expectations for career

progression.

In summary, several facts appear to be relevant to this study. They are:

1. Material regarding the impact of BZ promotions is not readily available. Some statistics are available but their impact is not. Written documents explain or describe the BZ system but do not analyze results.

2. The requirement by Secretary of the Army Calloway to promote 15% of all field grade lists from the secondary zone created questionable results which produced low BZ selection rates when the requirement was lifted.

3. The latest survey of the officer corps (PDOS-1985) shows satisfaction with the current system.

4. Although trends show promotion points moving out, current promotion points and selection percentages are within DOPMA goals.

In conclusion, data to support a change to this system is not currently available. Since any decision would be subjective in nature and change a system which affects few officers directly but many through perception, it is appropriate to require promotion boards to continue to make the decision as they do in the current system. These boards should be encouraged to pick the best qualified officers and to ask for relief from current

ceilings if BZ quality requires it. In the meantime, other methods of managing promotion points and opportunities should be explored. One such method, which has been used by the other services, is Selective Early Retirement.¹⁶ Another candidate for study is the requirement to serve three years in grade in order to be eligible for retirement in that grade. Finally, additional study of the BZ system is required in order to collect the data necessary to manage the system effectively. If the Army is to use the system as a management tool, more information about its impact, not just its statistics, should be obtained.

BZ HISTORICAL STATISTICS

Year	COL		LTC		MAJ	
	#	% of list	#	% of list	#	% of list
1969	66	7.9	193	5.9	270	7.5
1970	78	10.0	No Board		No Board	
1971	66	10.0	107	9.9	No Board	
1972	66	19.9	151	15.5	No Board	
1973	87	15.0	No Board		No Board	
1974	74	15.0	184	14.9	248	14.9
1975	61	15.0	253	15.0	328	10.9
1976	95	14.9	235	16.8	180	8.2
1977	77	14.3	154	12.6	159	7.2
1978	28	8.8	151	11.7	279	10.0
1979	73	10.5	78	5.0	97	3.8
1980	55	10.2	38	3.1	43	1.9
1981	53	7.9	33	2.1	19	0.9
1982	52	9.1	57	2.5	16	0.9
1983	62	10.0	69	3.7	12	0.6
1984	58	10.0	79	4.1	30	1.6
1985	14	2.7	38	2.2	52	2.8
1986	47	10.0	No Board		46	2.2

ENDNOTES

1. "Defense Officer Personnel Management Act," U.S. Code Congressional and Administrative News, p. 6340.
2. Ibid., p. 6339.
3. Ibid., p. 6341.
4. Ibid., p. 6355.
5. Ibid., p. 6349.
6. Maureen Mylander, The Generals Making It Military Style, p. 76.
7. "OPMS Status Report," Commanders Call, p. 23.
8. FY 87 OPMD Orientation and Counseling Guide, p. 152.
9. "OPMS Status Report," p. 23.
10. "A Concept of Career Management for Officer Personnel of the Armed Services," Committee Report of Ad Hoc Committee to Study and Revise the Officer Personnel Act of 1947, p. V-3.
11. Interview with Col. Bill Merrill, office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army, Manpower and Reserve Affairs, Oct 1986.
12. "OPMS Status Report," p. 25.
13. Statement by LTG Marion Ross, Deputy CG, U.S. FORSCOM during a B2 briefing to GEN Shoemaker, CG, FORSCOM in 1980.
14. Maureen Mylander, p. 32.
15. "Results of the Professional Development of Officers Study Surveys," Commanders Call, p. 20.
16. "A Concept of Career Management for Officer Personnel of the Armed Services," p. III-6.

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